

American Science Fiction

THERE

By C.L. Moore

SHALL BE

DARKNESS

STANLEY PITT

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Earth Empire was crumbling — and the captain knew it as he was ordered back, with the last of the troops stationed on Venus. The last civilization of the Solar System was falling into eternal darkness, as Mars and Jupiter had before it. And Venus could not be roused.

BLUE Venusian twilight filled the room where Quanna sat combing her hair before the glass. It was very quiet here. Quanna drew the long, pale strands through her comb with a somnolent rhythm, meeting her own eyes in the mirror. Reflected there she could see the windows behind her, blowing curtains that veiled the tremendous blue peaks which walled in Darva from the world. From far away a thunderous echo of avalanche shook the evening air a little and rumbled into silence.

No one—not even another Venusian—could have guessed what was going on behind the pale, translucent oval of Quanna's face, the unchanging dark eyes. She wore a blue-green robe the colour of the evening sky over Darva, and in the blue dusk her hair took on a faintly greenish cast. She was thinking of murder.

Behind her the door creaked. A man in uniform came into the room wearily, running his fingers through his black hair. The green star of earth glittered on his tunic. He grinned at Quanna.

"Get me a drink, will you?" he asked her in English. "Lord, how tired I am!"

Quanna was on her feet in a rustle of satin and a cloud of faint perfume. Her green-blond hair was so fine it seemed to float upon the air

as she turned. If ever there was any betrayal of feeling upon Quanna's pale Venusian face, it showed tenderness when she looked at James Douglas, commander of the last Terrestrial Patrol left on Venus.

"Come and lie down," she said in her gentlest voice. Her English was almost as easy as his own. "You do need a drink, poor darling. You've been working late again, Jamie?"

He nodded, letting her draw him to the deep couch below the windows which opened upon the high blue mountains and the roofs of Darva. She stood for a moment watching his face as he relaxed with a sigh upon the cushions. The couch creaked a little beneath him, for Douglas was a big man, built in the tradition of his Scottish ancestors upon another world, almost a giant among the slim Venusians. He was barrel-chested, thick through the shoulders; and his heavy black hair had gone frosty at the temples quite definitely in the last few months. Jamie Douglas had had much to think about, in solitude, since the last dispatches from Base came in.

He buried his crooked nose in the glass Quanna brought and drank thirstily, letting the cool, watered whisky go burning down his throat.

"Nothing like segir," he grinned up at the girl. "I'll miss it when"—he

caught himself—"if I'm ever recalled to Earth."

Quanna's eyes veiled. An Earth woman would have pounced upon the implication in that remark and dragged it into daylight. The Venusian girl waited. They both knew she would weave it into conversation perhaps hours later, worming the forbidden information out of him irresistibly, imperceptibly, as she had so often done in the past. Douglas cursed himself silently and gulped *segir* again.

Quanna's gaze lingered on his face as he drank. Twenty years under the flowing cloud-tides of Venus had not bleached his dark skin to pallor, but they had set their own marks upon his face. The broken nose was a memory of a mountain ambush in his subaltern days, and the long-fading scar above one ear an insignia of the fight in which he had won his captaincy. Even as long ago as that Imperial Earth had begun to feel her fingers slip upon her colonial worlds, and there had been fierce fighting in the mountains of Venus. There still was, but it would not last much longer—

Douglas held out his emptied glass. "Another," he said, and loosened his tunic collar. "I'm tired."

Quanna laid a long, cool hand upon his forehead in a gesture of reticent tenderness before she turned away to the little pantry where the ice and the *segir* were. The long folds of her robe hid what she was doing, but she did not drop a tablet into the drink this time. There had been enough in the first, and besides—besides she had information to draw out of him before she went away.

She pulled up a hassock and took her monochord harp from the wall after he had begun on the second drink, and began to pluck a plaintive melody from the single string, stopping it against its movable bridges with an intricate fingering. Douglas nodded in time with the music and began to hum, smiling at her.

"Funny," he mused. "You're a cosmopolitan, my dear, even if you've never stepped a foot off Venus. Scottish ballad on a Martian harp, trans-

posed to Venusian melody. What an old song it is, Quanna." He began to sing the words softly, his voice unmusical:

"The Otterburn's bonny burn,

It's pleasant there to be,

But there is naught on Otterburn

To feed my men and me—"

He shook himself a little and quieted. Quanna saw something dark and unhappy move across his face, and she struck one of two quivering notes from the string and said in a voice pitched to the music, so that it scarcely broke the silence at all:

"I'd like to see Earth, Jamie. Could I go back with you?"

"I wish you could," he answered in a low voice. "It won't be easy, my dear—I'll miss so much on Venus. I—" He sat up suddenly and scowled at her under black brows. "That wasn't fair, Quanna! You wouldn't catch me like that if I weren't tired. Oh, yes, damn it, I suppose you'll have to know soon, anyhow. Orders came to-day. We're going back."

"The last of the Patrols," murmured Quanna, still stroking the harp to faint music. "Venus will be free again, Jamie?"

His heavy brows drew down again above the crooked nose. "Free?" he said bitterly. "Oh, yes, free for Vastari and his cutthroats, if that's what you're thinking of. There'll be no more safety anywhere on Venus, if that's what freedom means to you. All this culture we've tried to build up in our three hundred years will crash in—oh, three hundred days, or less, once the protection of the Patrol fails. You'll have barbarism back again, my sweet. Is that what freedom means to a Venusian?"

She smiled at him, her face pale in the gathering twilight.

"Jamie, Jamie," she rebuked him gently. "Our ways were good enough before the Earthmen came. And you'll be going home—"

He set down his glass half emptied, as if the thought had closed his throat. Looking out between the long, swaying draperies, he said heavily: Oh, sure — I was born there, forty-odd years ago. I suppose it's home. But—I'll

miss Venus, Quanna." He reached out for her hand. "I'll miss you—I . . . I'm sleepy, Quanna. Play 'Otterburn' again, will you, my dear? I think I'll have a nap before dinner."

When Douglas was breathing evenly, Quanna put a pillow straighter under his black head, pulled a light coverlet over him and hung the harp away. In her bedroom she took down a velvet cloak of deep emerald-green and changed her sandals to riding boots of soft leather.

With the dark cloak hooding her, she paused by the door and touched a panel that slid inward without a sound. Not even the Earthman who designed the house knew about that panel, or about many other secret things which the Venusian workmen had built into the headquarters of the Terrestrial Patrol.

Quanna took a pistol from a shelf inside the panel and buckled it about her waist over the satin gown she wore. Her fingers lingered on a long flat box on the shelf and she drew it out hesitantly, glancing over her shoulder around the empty room.

Inside the box, bedded in velvet, lay a dagger with a silver haft and a long glass blade. Quanna took it out of its nest and tilted the crystal to the light. Venusian characters were traced in water colours on the blade. On one side they declared in crimson, "Vastari Shall Be King," and on the other were the simple characters that spelled a name, "James Douglas." By a coincidence, the Venusian name for Douglas had the same meaning as his Scottish patronym in the ancient Gaelic—Dhu Glas. Both meant "the dark man."

The dagger Quanna held was a ceremonial weapon, that could be used only once. It had never been used—yet. The crimson lettering would wash off at the first touch of any moisture. And the blade would splinter in its wound. It was meant to splinter. It had been given to Quanna six months past, with great ceremony. She should have used it long ago.

She laid it back in its box and closed the panel quickly. She woke in the blue night sometimes, trembling, out

of dreams about that glass dagger.

She drew the green cloak about her and went out swiftly. No one but the Venusian servants saw her pass, and they made furtive obeisance and looked after her with reverent eyes. So did the grooms in the stable where her saddled horse stood waiting. One of them said, "The waterfall cave, lady, up toward Thunder Range," and gave her the grave salute due Venusian rank. Quanna nodded and took the reins.

The Earth officer on duty at the outer gate never saw her pass. His men drew his attention away just long enough for the cloaked figure on the padding dark horse to slip like a shadow out of the gate, and the young Earthman could have sworn afterward that no one had gone that way.

The horse took to the rising trail outside Darva with its padded gait that has a rocking chair smoothness. Even the horses of Venus go furtively, on silent feet. This one climbed steadily up the twisting trail through the blue dusk which passes for night in the zone where Darva lies.

Night and day have only roughly equivocal terms in the Venusian tongues, but there is a slow rhythm of thermals over a broad belt of Dayside, caused by the liberation of the planet, that gives something corresponding to them. There are periods of dim-blue chill, and periods of opalescent noons when the sun is a liquid blaze behind high mists. The intervals are months long in some parts of Dayside, but here the tremendous mountains create air currents of their own, and the cloud-tides have a much briefer rhythm, though still too varied to make Venusians clearly understand night and day.

The great blue mountains loomed purple and violet in the dusk as Quanna rode up the trail. She could hear countless waterfalls tinkling and trickling away like music all around her, a back-ground to the slow, far-off thunder of a rockslide that shook the cliffs with its echoes.

The lifting crags that rushed straight up a thousand feet into the clouds were shocking to Earth eyes even after a lifetime on Venus, but Quanna

scarcely noticed the familiar sheer cliffs of purple rock hanging like doom itself above her as she climbed. She had been born among these cliffs, but she did not mean to die here. If she had her way, she would die on another planet and be buried under the smooth green soil of Earth, where sunlight and starlight and moonlight changed in a clear sky she could not quite imagine, for all the tales she had heard.

The cavern she was seeking lay two hours high in the towering peaks above Darva. No one but a Venusian could have found it in less than days. Both Quanna and her horse knew the path well enough, but it was a difficult climb even for them, and when they came out into the cathedral-walled canyon where a thin waterfall swayed like smoke, the horse's sides were heaving with the steepness of the climb.

In these narrow walls the waterfall made a thunderous music. Quanna drew her cloak over her face and rode straight through the smoking veil of water, into the Gothic arch of the cavern beyond. She whistled three clear, liquid notes as she came, and heard answering music echo from the walls, piercing the roar of the waterfall.

Around two bends firelight flickered. Quanna slid off the horse into the waiting arms of servants and went down a sparkling sandy slope toward the fire. Light danced bewilderingly upon a fairyland of crystalline columns which slow centuries had built of dripping water here. It was an Aladdin cave of flashing jewels in the firelight.

Of the group by the fire, all but one man rose as Quanna came forward, her scarlet boots showing and fading with delicate precision beneath her emerald cloak. Quanna had been trained meticulously in every rite that befits a Venusian woman, and ceremonious behaviour was not the least of her knowledge. Even her gait was traditional as she approached the men before the fire.

They had risen—all but the hooded old one—not in deference to her rank or her womanhood, for women are

not held highly on Venus, but because she was an important emissary bringing news of the enemy. And had they had reason to think her news would be bad or her prestige in the enemy camp lowered, they would not have risen. Under the elaborate ceremony of Venusian courts is a basis of dog-eat-dog which shocks Earthmen. Venusians scorn the unsuccessful and toady to the strong with a certain courtliness which ingratiates even as it repels.

The richly coloured robes of the men made points of jewel colours dance along the crystalline walls as they moved. A young man pushed impetuously out among them and came forward, his crimson cloak swinging from supple shoulders, his long fair hair swinging too, as he came to meet the girl. The two of them were as alike in looks as blood relation can make man and woman. Quanna took both his hands with the exact degree of deference which was due from her temporary man-status as important spy. Vastari's face blazed with impatient eagerness as Quanna exchanged the proper ceremonious greetings with the group of tribe leaders around the fire. It amused her a little to let her royal brother wait upon her. She met the fierce stares of the other men composedly, too accustomed all her life to seeing that avid hope for disaster in every face to notice it much now. No Venusian rises to influence without knowing very well the eager, searching stare of rivals hungry for a sign of weakness.

Last of all she smiled at the hooded figure by the fire, who gave her back a greeting in a harsh hissing voice that was very pleasant to her ears.

"Well?" demanded Vastari, pulling her to a seat upon cushions by the fire as the last ceremonies fell silent and the leaders grouped wolfishly around to listen. "Well, how goes it, sister? Is the glass knife broken yet?"

"Not yet," said Quanna, making her voice low and confident. "The Earthmen have a fable about a goose that laid golden eggs. It's still too soon to kill ours, brother. The Dark Man gave me great news only a few

hours ago." She used a Venusian term of time measurement which is so complex that few Earthmen ever master it. Watching the avid eyes fixed upon her all around the fire, she went on: "The last Patrol is leaving Venus. The orders came in to-day."

Vastari smacked his ringed hands together and cried out something exultant in a voice too choked for articulation. The fire always smouldering behind his eyes blazed up with all but perceptible violence.

"Leaving!" he cried. "So they've come to it at last. Do you hear, all of you? That means freedom! Venus under Venusian rule, after three hundred years of Earth tyranny! Is it true, Quanna?"

"True enough, surely," said a harsh voice behind him. They all turned. The cloaked figure at the fireside had thrown back his hood from a crest of white hair and was smiling at them sadly now, horny lids drooping over his eyes. "I've seen it coming all my life, children. Mars was great once, too, you see." He lifted bony shoulders in a shrug.

"But aren't you glad, Ghej?" Vastari spun toward him, scarlet cloak flying with the motion. Everything he did had a quicksilver volatility. "The freedom we were fighting for, put right in our hands? No more hiding in the mountains for us, Ghej! No more Earth laws! A free Venus, after three hundred years of tyranny!"

The old Martian lifted his peaked brows.

"Is freedom always good, then? Freedom can mean anarchy, my boy."

Vastari snapped his fingers impatiently. "Out of anarchy, something may grow," he said. "Under tyranny, nothing can. You'll help us, won't you, Ghej?"

Ghej looked up somberly under his triangular lids. "Against Earth? You don't need help against the Imperial Planet, son, Earth has brought her own ruin upon her, and nothing we can do will affect that. I know. I saw Mars fall."

He put his chin in his hand and stared into the fire under heavy lids. Ghej had a strange way of talking about the past of millenniums ago

as if he himself had been present. It was the result of the vivid three-dimensional pictorial records by which all Martians learn their history in childhood.

Vastari's face, as he turned away, was unconsciously eloquent with the impatience of the young for the dreaming old.

One of the tribe leaders leaned forward, jutting a scarred, wolfish face above his robe of apricot velvet. His eyes glittered at Quanna.

"She brings news the old Martian could have told us years ago," he declared, his voice jealous and eager. "That same news my own spies will bring me to-morrow from the city. What other reasons has she for calling herself our equal? I say, let her kill the Earthman and go back to the harem where she belongs."

There was a rising of voices around the fire, some few in agreement, most deprecating not so much the sentiment as the crude way in which it had been put. The true Venusian prefers his malice more deftly expressed.

Quanna faced them equably. Showing no resentment—it did not behoove a woman to resent openly anything a man might say—she declared in a voice pitched low:

"To us in the city it doesn't look so simple, lord. With the right knowledge, we may glean much from the Earthmen before they go."

The scarred hillman pounded his velvet knee with a clenched fist. "I say fight as we planned!" he roared. "Fight and conquer and loot, before they can get away from us! It was good enough for our fathers, wasn't it? What do we want a new plan for? Kill and loot, and all this waiting be damned!"

A babble of voices echoed him around the fire, cut off in a moment by the brilliant scarlet of Vastari's leap, his red cloak streaming. There was a flash of glittering colours in one swift arc and a thud of weapon on flesh, all too quick for the eye or the brain to follow clearly.

Then Vastari was standing over a huddled hillman, the scarlet cloak settling in bright folds about him and his wickedly jewel-studded black-jack

swinging ready for another blow. The hillman nursed his smashed nose, blood running down beneath his hand to spatter upon apricot velvet.

Vastari's eyes glittered dangerously up at the rest under lowered brows as he stood above the silenced rebel, head sunk between his shoulders. The bloody blackjack swung in short, twitching arcs that caught the firelight in jeweled glints.

"Has Ystri any friends here?" he demanded softly. No one spoke. Vastari bent and deliberately slapped Ystri's face twice, heavy blows that rocked his head. The hillman was nearly twice Vastari's size, but he made no move to retaliate, only crouched there masking his broken nose behind a bunched hand and glaring up with reluctant respect in his eyes.

The same respect showed in every subdued face around the fire as Vastari turned away with a certain swagger, hooking the blackjack back in his belt, careless of the blood smear upon his satin tunic.

"This isn't the way to freedom," Vastari said, reseating himself beside Quanna. "If we quarrel among ourselves, we'll go the way so many went before us. We're no guerrilla band, squabbling for loot! Freedom is worth a little sacrifice to-day if we can take all Venus to-morrow! It was not under slavery that Earthmen conquered their empire. They were free men, fighting for themselves. We must be free, too, if we can hope to conquer Venus. Free of Earth rule and free of all petty greeds among ourselves. We aren't children, snatching at toys. We're free-born leaders fighting to drive Earthmen off our soil and rule Venus under Venusian law."

The fire of the crusader kindled in Vastari's voice as he went on. "If Ystri had his way, he'd attack Darva and die. The Earthmen have weapons we can't hope to conquer. And even if we did—what would happen? Ystri and his kind would loot and run back to the mountains, each to his separate stronghold, each with all he could carry. And presently each would envy his neighbour's loot, and in a little while you'd all be back

where I found you, little nations too busy with your petty squabbles to unite against Earth rule or the raiders from Darkside or anything else that threatens you. Fools like Ystri made Earth tyranny possible on Venus. Fools like Ystri will bring it on us again if they ever return, unless I can unite us all. Union and freedom! Think of it, men!"

Vastari stood up and began to pace the shining floor with long, nervous strides. The heads of his hearers turned to follow him as if hypnotised. His voice shook and glowed with his passionate sincerity, and the bright light of avarice kindled in the eyes that followed his pacing.

"I tell you, it will be worth fighting for! We must be rid of the Earthman, but we mustn't ruin ourselves to drive him out. There will be much to do after he's gone—leaving his weapons behind him. We must have those weapons! We can't conquer Venus without them. And that's why Quanna must go back to Darva and learn more of their plans. Somehow, we must possess what the Earthmen now possess, if we intend to rule Venus as they did. That will take courage—cunning and courage. And after that—" Vastari paused, looking up into the glittering shadows of the ceiling with eyes that saw something far away and wonderful. "After that—freedom and Venus will be ours! The Earthmen fought for freedom long ago—and won it and conquered the stars with it! Our turn is next. When the Earthmen were first fighting against tyranny they sang an old battle song whose words might be our own. Quanna learned it from her Earthman. I'd like you all to hear it Quanna—"

She bent her smooth fair head becomingly and began in a low, clear voice to chant as well as she could in Venusian to the tune of a very old drinking song of Earth, once the battle anthem of a nation that had fallen long ago. The listening men sat silent, firelight glittering in their eyes. It was a curious scene; surely the song had never been sung in a stranger setting than this crystalline ice cavern with its pale, sparkling

shadows, to these wolfish men in their gorgeously coloured robes.

"Oh, thus be it ever when free men shall stand

Between their loved homes and the tyrant's oppression."

sang Quanna. Vastari's fanatic young face lighted up at the words, his lips moved soundlessly mouthing them.

"Then conquer we must,
For our cause, it is just,
And this be our motto: 'In God is our trust!'"

And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave

O'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!"

Behind the group the grey Martian listened enigmatically, his leathery face sad.

Jamie Douglas awakened to a room translucent with the blue twilight of the ebbing cloud-tide. His mind was clear and relaxed for a moment, as tranquil as the twilight in the room. Then memory came back, and the familiar heaviness of spirit, and he sat up slowly, the crease deepening between his black brows. Quanna sat by the window where the breeze just lifted her fine, pale hair. When she heard him stir she turned, tranquillity in every gentle motion she made.

"How well you slept," she murmured, rising. "I couldn't bear to wake you, Jamie, you were so soundly asleep. You must have been very tired, dear."

He leaned forward on the edge of the couch, forearms crossed on knees so his big shoulders hunched. He looked up at her under his brows rather as Vastari had looked up in the crystal cavern, but with all the difference in the world in his dark, weary face.

"I had a dream," he said somberly. "I thought I was back in Norristown, at the edge of the Twilight Belt, and the mountaineers were attacking. I thought a spear went through me, right here—" He laid a hand on his tunic just above the belt buckle. "It was so real it still hurt for a moment after I woke up. But in the dream it didn't hurt at all. I thought it nailed me to the wall, and I pulled it out

and—" He laughed and hesitated. "Dreams are silly things. I thought I led a charge brandishing that bloody spear, and we drove the attackers back." He laughed again, but looked up at her under the black brows with a dark and somber gaze, no laughter in his eyes.

Quanna shivered a little under her blue-green gown. "Don't look at me like that," she said lightly. "It was only a dream. Wouldn't you like some coffee, Jamie dear? You missed dinner, you know."

He ignored the question. "What was it you were playing before I fell asleep? 'Otterburn,' wasn't it?" He hummed the tune, and words came back to his memory.

"Oh, I have dreamed a dreary dream

Beyond the Isle of Skye;
I saw a dead man win a fight,

And I think that man was I—"

"The Isle of Skye," he repeated after a long moment. "I wonder! The old Isle of Skye's on Earth, but you and I are on a new one now, Quanna. From Earth, wouldn't Venus be the Isle of Skye?"

She shook her head, the fine hair clouding about her face. "I can't picture it all. Stars! Shall I ever see them, Jamie?"

"Not from Venus. And Earth's no safe place to be just now, my dear. No, you're safer on your Isle of Skye. As for me—" He shook his black head. "Now if I believed in dreams as my people used to do, I'd take that one for an omen." He stood up "Did you say something about coffee? Lord how I must have slept!"

Quanna's smile as she rose had the clarity of uttermost innocence. When she opened the door the tall figure standing there with knuckles lifted to knock made her jump a little.

"Lieutenant!" she laughed. "You startled me."

"Commander here?" Lieutenant Morgan, second in command at Darva Post, gave her an impassive stare from sleepy, brown eyes.

"Come in, Morgan," called Jamie from the room beyond. "All right, Quanna. Run along and bring that coffee."

Morgan entered with the loose-jointed, deceptive laziness that coloured everything he did.

"Don't like that girl," he said, looking at the closed door under his lids.

Jamie laughed. "You don't like any Venusian."

"Damn right I don't. You'll wake up with a knife in your ribs some day, commander."

Douglas said: "Not Quanna's knife."

"Think not?" Morgan shrugged. "By the way, Vastari was up in the hills last night." He glanced out of the windows toward the great leaning cliffs above Darva, where the light was broadening as the morning cloud-tide thinned. A long rumble of rock-slide shook the window frames as he spoke.

"Attack?" asked Jamie.

"No, just a pow-wow. They're up to something, commander."

"Oh, I suppose so. They usually are. Any ideas?"

"Two to one they know we're leaving. That means ambush somewhere on the way out."

"Or attack here?"

Morgan shook his head. "Too risky. Vastari's no fool."

"Maybe not open attack. But they'll hate to see us leaving with all our artillery. Vasari'd like that for his campaigns in the mountains. He'll try to get it, and he'll try hard."

"Preferably by foul means," put in Morgan with a grin. "He—"

A gentle tap at the door interrupted him. Quanna looked in deprecatingly.

"A caller, commander," she said. "The Martian trader, Ghej—"

Jamie stood up quickly. "Ghej! Come in, come in! It's good to see you. Quanna, how about coffee for us all?"

The cloaked grey figure came in with the odd little shuffle in his gait that is so typically Martian. Jamie had a sudden Scots premonition that vanished in a moment and left him deriding himself, but in that moment the grey-robed figure had looked like Death shuffling in to greet him, holding out its hand. He remembered

his dream, and the buried Celtic credulity of his forebears rose in the light just long enough for him to wonder if he were to leave Venus after all, if his longing to stay were to be granted more grimly than he had bargained for. The Isle of Skye, the morning star—

"I saw a dead man win a fight,

And I think that man was I—"

"Superstitious fool!" he apostrophised himself half angrily, and held out his hand to Ghej.

"I would not have liked to miss you, commander," said the Martian in his precise English, accepting the chair Morgan pushed forward. "I hear you are leaving Venus soon."

Jamie threw up his hands in a gesture of despair. "Half Venus seems to have heard about it already."

Ghej's upper lip drew down in his beaklike smile. "I have been liquidating my assets for over a year now," he told them, "preparing for this day." The smile grew one-sided and twisted down a bit sadly at the corners. With his left hand he made the crook-sign of ancient Mars in the air. "Remember?" he asked. "It happened to Mars, too. I know about Rome and America and the other great fallen empires of Earth. I could see this coming a long way off. As you could see it, commander."

There was unconscious sadness in Jamie's own smile. "Officially this is known as 'temporary consolidation,'" he told the Martian. Ghej lifted deprecating brows and pulled the long upper lip down in a grimace. He was too polite to say what all three men in the room were thinking.

This is the end of the Solar Empire of Earth. This is the last Patrol, out of all the strong network that once bound the worlds together by unbreakable chains of men. The links are loosening; the Empire is falling apart. Earth evacuates the planet it has ruled for three hundred years. The Queen Star of Earth is an outworn emblem now. Barbarian hordes from the outer world are pouring down upon the Imperial Planet, armed with the weapons Earth taught them to make, that Earth might be destroyed. Little by little her grasp has

let go. One by one the Patrols go home to defend the mother world. This is the last.

"Venus will be a different world without you," said Ghej, smoothing his cloak over one knee. "It will be interesting to see what happens to the Terrestrialised cities—all the clean, broad streets, the markets, the busy shops—how long will they last?"

"Just as long as it takes Vastari to burn them," Morgan declared bitterly.

Ghej nodded. "Vastari probably justifies himself in his own mind. They say he has reason to hate Earth, you know. He'll want to destroy everything on Venus that has a Terrestrial background."

"Three hundred years of Earth rule," mused Jamie. "Three hours in the life of the race! Sometimes I wonder if twenty centuries would have been enough to make an impression on these people. Sometimes I wonder if everything we've done on Venus hasn't been wholly in vain for both worlds. Six months after we've gone, the Terrestrialised cities will be gone, too. What the fire leaves the jungles will take over. Cementine huts will rise where cementine huts stood three hundred years ago, and there won't be a trace left of anything Earthmen tried to do. No more cities where children can grow up in safety. No more protection for the farms that provide against starvation in famine seasons. Oh, damn Vastari!"

"He can't help being a Venusian," said Ghej mildly.

Jamie slapped his chair arms with impatient palms. "I know. It's just that—well, I've been on Venus a long time now. I fought at the second siege of Norristown when I was twenty. I flew with Cressy when he explored the Twilight Belt. Here at Darva I've seen the city grow into something to be proud of. I got the appropriations myself to build the storehouses that tided three whole tribes over the last famine season. When I think of Vastari wiping it all out the moment my back's turned, I could strangle him with my bare hands!"

"The Venusians are like quicksilver.

commander," Ghej said thoughtfully. "They slip away from contact with the logic of other worlds."

"I know. It's because they're still barbarians, isn't it? Perhaps they'll always be barbarians. They have no words in any of their languages for 'loyalty' or 'honour' or any of the high-sounding ideals we live by. They have no values above the selfish animal values of survival. They're incapable of civilised thoughts as we define civilisation. I tell you, Venus is stagnant already, for all her rawness. There's barbarism at both ends of the social scale, you know, and the men of Venus have gone from one barbarism to the other with no interval of true civilisation between." Jamie slapped the chair arms again.

"Think of Norris, colonising Venus. Can you imagine any Venusian enduring such hardships, simply for an ideal? Remember the first siege of Norristown? The colonists could have taken ships for home any time that year, and abandoned Venus and everything Norris and his men died to establish. But they didn't. They stuck it out until the rescue ships came, a whole year late. Did you ever read the story of that siege, Ghej? Unceasing attack from the swamps and the seas, unceasing fevers and disease from the unknown plagues of Venus. But the colonists had a greater fever than anything Venus could inflict—the feverish dream of empire that was sweeping the Solar System then.

"The soldiers died on the walls one by one, and the civilians took up the battle. When the spaceship came in at last with provisions, they found the women and children, the invalids and the wounded manning the guns, and not one able-bodied fighting man left on his feet.

"That burning idealism has no roots in Venusian minds. And yet, you know, there's something irresistibly fascinating about the planet and the people. It's raw and lusty. It's the future. Venus from Earth is the morning star, and I think that's more than symbolism now."

Jamie got up and walked to the window, looking out over the roofs

of Darva towards the tremendous blue mountains where the cloud-tide thinned to let brightening daylight through.

"Back on Earth I'll be a misfit. An outlander. Earth is a world of orderly gardens and tamed seas and landscaped mountain ranges. The people are set in a pattern. You know to a syllable just how they'll react to a given situation. It makes you yawn to think of it when you've spent twenty years on Venus under these gigantic mountains, where the people are as wild and unpredictable as the cloudbursts.

"I've forgotten the polite formulas of Earth that cover every possible situation. They've got a tight little society there and I won't fit into it anywhere."

Jamie was silent, and for a long moment no one spoke. Jamie's mind went on:

"Not that it matters how Earth accepts any of us colonials. I have an idea we've seen the last of our little play-paradises with their formal rules. They don't tell us much here on Venus, but the last news I heard was of barbarian bases spotted through Earth like a plague, and barbarian invaders pouring down out of the sky in ships we taught them how to build, with weapons we put into their hands many years ago."

He couldn't say that aloud, not even to Morgan. Certainly not to an outworld trader, however well he knew Ghej. He couldn't say what had burned in his mind for so many months now, the terrible fear that had come to him and to the civilised world generations too late to save it.

For the era of civilised man was ending. Jamie almost wished he hadn't had the leisure to see it coming. He wished he hadn't read the old books, for he could see the cycle closing in as it had closed for other cultures long ago.

"They say we're temporarily consolidating," he thought, staring out at the great cloud-marbled mountains.

"I know better. I've got a perspective here they don't have at home, or won't admit having. I know the signs of rottenness, and the signs are

plain on Earth. It'll take a better race than modern man to win back what we're letting go.

"And there is no such race. The Venusians might have done it—but they won't now. Another few centuries and we might have instilled some conception of what idealism means into those slippery quicksilver minds. I don't know. We'll never do it now. And the Venusians were our last hope.

"No other race remains. The barbarians who are conquering Earth are decadent barbarians. The other worlds of the empire are either old civilisations, more tired than even we, or subhuman tribes which no amount of teaching could lift much above apothood.

"And so the greatest empire that mankind ever knew is crumbling from within, without a hope of rebirth."

The strong fragrance of coffee entering the room like a tangible presence broke the little silence that had fallen upon the three men. Quanna came in smiling, followed by servants with trays. Her deep, quiet eyes saw everything readable on the faces before her, though no eyes caught her looking. She poured the coffee deftly.

When she handed Ghej his cup she set a small silver platter of bread at his elbow, according to the ceremonious Venusian custom, observed even among outworld people on Venus. There, as on Earth, bread symbolises the staff of life, and guests are served with it whenever food is served and whether they intend to taste it or not.

Ghej's horny-lidded eyes flickered at the plate and then slanted a glance up at Quanna. She caught it wonderingly. Something was afoot, then. Something concerning Jamie, for in the elaborate symbolism which governs all Venusian living, bread is the emblem for leader or head of the household.

"I think you misunderstand Vastari, commander," said Ghej, sipping his coffee. "It's true that no Venusian seems to comprehend what other worlds call idealism. But, in his own mind, Vastari is probably quite sure of his rightness. He talks of freedom, you know."

"Freedom to loot and burn, and starve afterward!"

"Perhaps," Ghej nodded, and began to toy with the silver knife that lay across the bread platter. "I think so. But then I represent the past, gentlemen. My world died millenniums ago. You yourselves are present; Your worlds are passing. Vastari is the future. What he does with it only the future can show. You and I will not be here to see." He shook his crested head and, picking up the knife, drove it idly halfway through the loaf of bread beside him. Under the horny lids he flickered up a glance at Quanna.

"As a trader among the mountain tribes, commander," he remarked irrelevantly, "it has been my business for many years to fathom Venusian mentalities as nearly as any outworlder can. I've seen a hillman, for instance, take revenge for a blow by striking not at his attacker but at his attacker's enemy, in the dead of night. None but a Venusian could clearly understand the tangle of motives behind such a revenge—

"Excellent coffee, my dear Quanna. May I have another cup?"

In the blue twilight of Jamie's bedroom nothing moved but the softly blowing curtains. Jamie's regular, hoarse breathing was the only sound except for an occasional, faraway thunder of rock-slide and the receding footsteps of the sentry who paced outside the commander's quarters.

Jamie's sleep was deep. Quanna had seen to that with the nightcap she had served him. Now she sat in the farthest corner of the room, where the shadows hung as blue as if in some submarine cavern, far down under Venusian seas. She sat in perfect stillness, unwinking eyes fixed upon the window beyond which the shadow and the footsteps of the sentry passed and repassed.

She was grateful to Ghej. She was not sure how he could have guessed about her feeling for the commander, but she knew he had guessed. He was fit, almost, to be a Venusian in his sensitive perception of nuances. She knew, too, how it had amused him to tell her by symbolism and indirection

under the very noses of an oblivious audience that Ystri planned to murder Jamie. Yes, Ghej had lived long enough on Venus to think almost like a Venusian himself.

As she waited here in the twilight for the assassin she was not unduly perturbed. She knew enough of her race in general and Ystri in particular to be sure he would come alone. He could not wholly trust any coplotter not to betray him to Vastari, and he would want the glory alone if he succeeded.

The sentry's feet gritted up and down on the pavement outside; Jamie's heavy breathing measured the silence in the room. Quanna sat unwinking and waited.

She could not have said what warned her when the time came. Certainly no sound. But when the sentry's tread approached the far end of his beat and a shadow slid up to the thin grille that masked the windows, Quanna was at the grille and crouching low against it before the shadow itself was aware of her. It must have been something of a shock to the newcomer to find a second figure six inches away just inside the screen. The shadow started back with a muffled gasp.

Quanna breathed, "Ystri—look!" and let the light from the gateway shine for an instant on the snub-nosed gun she held.

"Quick!" whispered Ystri, speaking indistinctly because of his injured nose. "Let me in! The sentry—"

"No." Quanna's voice was flat. "I know what you want. Not to-night, Ystri."

"Let me in," Ystri demanded fiercely, "or the commander will know tomorrow that you are a spy."

Quanna thought he meant that. His prestige had been severely damaged by Vastari's blow; he might do anything to discredit her and Vastari through her.

"Not to-night," she temporised. "I have plans—Afterward, you may kill him."

"I don't trust you!"

"To-morrow—"

"Traitor!" hissed Ystri. "Let me in! With him dead, there'll be con-

fusion enough to steal weapons, even take the town! In Vastari's name, let me in!"

"Not to-night! To-morrow I'll prove myself—kill him if you can, then. But not here."

"Where then? You're lying."

"It's the truth. To-morrow I'll bring him into a trap for you. The mangrove forest, say? At cloud-ebb to-morrow?"

Ystri peered at her doubtfully in the blue dimness through the grille. The sentry's returning feet grew louder on the pavement, but Ystri hesitated for one last mistrustful moment.

"Is this the truth? Do you swear it by Vastari?"

"I swear. I'll bring him into the mangrove forest to-morrow, to kill if you can."

Ystri scowled at her in the twilight, seeing a certain sincerity upon her face that made him accept the promise reluctantly. That, and the gun gleaming dully in reflected light.

"To-morrow at cloud-ebb, then—or you both die," he growled, and his shadow melted from the grille without a sound. Quanna sat back on her heels and looked after him, her eyes deep and expressionless.

"The mangrove forest?" Jamie's voice was doubtful, but he turned his horse toward the upward path. "That gloomy place? Sure you want to ride that way?"

Quanna smiled at him under her hood of emerald velvet. "You said I could choose—and it's our last ride together on Venus, Jamie dear."

"Oh, all right. I always get my feet wet there, but—have it your way."

"I think it's a lovely place, Jamie. Listen, Jamie, I'll sing to you—a going-away song."

The Martian monochord harp hung at her saddle. She laid it across her green velvet knee and began a soft Venusian chant with a ringing call at the end of each stanza. Partly it was to amuse Jamie, partly to warn the hiding Ystri of their coming. It would amuse Ystri, too, in a grim sort of way, for this was a going-away song indeed, a Venusian dirge for a man about to die.

The mangrove forest lay high in a narrow canyon above Darva. Jamie and Quanna had ridden here more than once before, for the pleasure of walking the narrow mossy ways that wound over the water. The forest filled a valley between peaks veined with waterfalls whose music tinkled all around the canyon. It was half swamp, half lake of clear dark water out of which gigantic mangroves rose in arches and columns and long green aisles. The labyrinthine paths wound intricately over the great gnarled roots which stood above the water.

The glassy surfaces gave back such faithful reflections that the forest seemed double, suspended in green space. It was like walking in a dream to stroll along the winding, mossy ways and watch one's own reflection swimming dimly underfoot.

Not even the padding Venusian horses could walk these paths. Jamie and Quanna dismounted at the mouth of the canyon and entered the glassy forest in silence except for the music Quanna stroked now and again from her harp. She was watching for Ystri. He would not be easy to see, she knew. It was not for nothing that she had worn her green cloak to-day, and he was certain to be green-clad, too, and almost invisible in the bewildering reaches of the forest.

They had strolled a long way into the mirrory labyrinth before a sliding motion among the trees caught Quanna's eye. She had been sure he would come alone, and she could see now that she had not been mistaken. She had been sure, too, that he would not use a gun. He wanted Jamie dead for many reasons. The chiefest was to forestall Vastari of the glory of that murder, and Ystri would want to use the long Venusian dagger for that pleasure. And so he would have to creep close enough to stab Jamie in the back, and there was no danger of a random shot across the water.

But Ystri was wary. Jamie had an evil reputation among the outlaws and Ystri was not one to risk having this particular quarry turn to face him before his blow drove home. Quanna had to lead the way deeper and deeper into the forest, where the

great mangrove roots made paths broad enough so that no reflections showed in the water, before the green moving shadow that was Ystri drew near.

If Quanna's heart was beating harder under her emerald robe, no hint of it showed in her face when she decided the time was near to do what must be done:

"I've a surprise for you, Jamie dear," she said, pausing to face him under a great vaulting arch of green. "Will you wait for me a moment here? I'll be back in five minutes." And then, because the danger was near and great just then, she tiptoed and took his dark face between her hands and kissed him quickly on the mouth.

Venusians are not demonstrative people. Jamie stared after her as she turned swiftly away, the green robe swirling. Her long, dark look and the unexpected kiss had carried an air of foreboding that made him loosen the gun in his belt and watch the forest around him with vague uneasiness, for no tangible reason. And that result, perhaps, Quanna had foreseen, too, when she kissed him. There are double motives behind most of the things Venusians do.

Quanna went swiftly, on soundless feet, along a pathway that twisted out of sight. Her green reflection went with her in the water, smooth and stealthy. She was making a circle as directly as possible in these winding ways, and in a few moments she saw ahead of her another green and stealthy figure moving forward from tree to tree. Quanna smiled.

Jamie had lighted a cigarette. In the glassy stillness the click of his lighter was audible from far away, and the pungency of the smoke spread through the heavy fragrances of the water jungle. She could see his dark head down an aisle of greenness; he had set his back to a tree and was smoking desultorily, flicking ashes into the water and watching the spreading circles that they made.

Ahead of her the green shadow of Ystri slipped forward with a sudden rush, quick and deadly. A knife caught the light and glinted.

Quanna covered the distance at a soft-footed run which the moss hushed. Her green cloak unfolded like a hover of wings behind her and the flash from beneath it rose an instant before the glimmer of steel in Ystri's fist rose.

There is no sound quite like the solid thud of a dagger driven hilt-deep into flesh, hard, with a full-armed swing. Jamie knew it from all other sounds and had spun with his gun in his hand before Ystri himself knew quite what had happened to him. Ystri must at first have felt only the heaviness of the blow which even from behind was hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs. He gasped once for air, and whirled to face Quanna, open-mouthed.

His face contorted with fury when he realised what had happened and his second gasp was for the breath to betray her, but she had struck deftly and a gush of bright blood, startlingly bright, smothered the words on his lips.

There was no need for explanations. Jamie holstered his gun slowly, seeing that he would not need it. Quanna's expressionless eyes watched Ystri fall, the glare of fury in his eyes to the last as he mouthed futilely against the torrent of blood frothing over the apricot velvet tunic which his green robe fell back to reveal. There were old bloodstains there, too. It was the same tunic he had worn in the cavern. She thought briefly that the blood-letting which her brother had begun two days ago the sister had finished here.

Jamie was staring at her questioningly over the body. It lay with one arm dragging in the water; Quanna put out her foot and rolled it over without emotion. It slid into the water with scarcely a splash and the mirriory surface closed over the brilliant colours of apricot and green, bright fresh scarlet and the brown of old blood. Above the spreading circles Quanna looked up to Jamie and smiled.

"I have saved your life, Jamie," she said.

He bit his lip. Lives are not saved

gratuitously on Venus. It is a matter of investment, done deliberately with a specific price in mind, and among Venusians if the price is refused the life is forfeit, then and there or at any time thereafter, without penalty of a blood-feud from the victim's relatives. This relentless code is as near, perhaps, as Venusians come to maintaining an abstract ideal about anything at all.

"I suppose there's no use asking what's behind all this," said Jamie, nodding at the water which had closed over Vstri's body.

Quanna lifted a brow. "Oh, that. I saw him—I had a favour to ask of you. Is there a better way to buy it than this?"

He knew he would never be told any more of the story than that. No use asking. He lifted his shoulders resignedly.

"You saved my life," he acknowledged. "What do you want?"

"To go back to Earth with you," she told him promptly. "You'll take me, Jamie?"

He squinted a curious glance at her. She might have asked for money, weapons, anything but an intangible like this. An intangible he could not give her.

"Quanna," he said gently, "don't you think I'd take you if I could?"

"You are commander. What can stop you?"

"Look, dear." He stepped forward over the bloodstains on the moss and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Earth's a . . . an armed camp. No one's safe there now. You never saw cities bombed—you can't imagine the life you'd have to lead if you came back with me."

"I'm not a child, Jamie." She lifted unfathomable dark eyes to his.

"I know—I know." He tried helplessly to make her understand. "But I'm not going home for pleasure, Quanna. I'm going to fight. I think we'll have to go on fighting there as long as . . . as long as we can. If I took you along, you'd be in constant danger. There'd be forced march after forced march, front-line duty—life under siege at the very

best. And at worst—without me, what would become of you?"

"I'm willing to risk all that, Jamie dear."

He let his hands fall. "I can't, Quanna. Even if I could let you risk it, I'm not free to handicap myself with a woman. I'm going home to fight, my dear. Don't you understand? Earth is calling us back because of desperate need. I'm a soldier of the Imperial Planet—I have no right to divide my efficiency in half because I've a woman to look out for everywhere I go—"

"But why must you go at all, Jamie?" She said it very gently. "What can one man mean among so many? Why not stay here on Venus with me?"

His black brows met above the crooked nose.

"If I could make you understand that, my dear," he said wryly, "I wouldn't half so much mind going."

And so it went on, for a long while. To Quanna the words that Jamie used were often as meaningless as the motives behind them. She wondered afterward that she had not used the dagger which tradition gave her the right to use, upon this dark and stubborn Terrestrial who was so intent upon destroying her happiness and his own.

Long and hotly they debated, standing over the bloodstain on the moss with the forest glassily quivering all around them. When they turned home at last along the reflecting pathways, Quanna went submissively, her hooded head bent at the angle suitable to a Venusian woman in the presence of her lord, but she had not surrendered.

She would have to change her plan; that was all. If he would not take her of his free will, then she would force him to it. She would find some lever stronger than the one which had just failed her. For he knew and she knew that she would not take the life she had saved. She had not killed Ystri for that.

Yes, she would find a lever, and she would have no mercy in her use of it, for it would take some intol-

erable force indeed to swerve Jamie from his course.

When the blue twilight was deepest over Darva and the Terrestrialised city slept, Quanna went up the winding stair which led to the roof of the commander's quarters. It was the dark of the cloud-flow, but she carried no light. Artificial lighting is rare on Venus, which never knows true darkness on Dayside. Quanna moved unerringly through the blue gloom upon the roof.

She carried a sheaf of slender, hollow rods under her arm, and in one hand a basket of decaying flowers. The heavy, noxiously sweet fragrance of their dissolution is irresistible to several species of Venus' flying creatures, most of them poisonous.

Quanna jointed her hollow rods together until she had a long, slender pole, about whose upper end she twined garlands of the heavy-smelling rotting blossoms, working deftly in the near-darkness. Darva was hushed below her. From the mountains behind her to the mountains before blew the fragrances of jungle canyons; and the rumble of rock-slides thundered from far away.

Darva was built like a medieval fortress, a walled plateau guarded by crenelated mural towers at regular intervals all around the city. The commander's quarters were built into the upper end of the wall, one with it, so that the roof upon which Quanna stood looked down sheerly over wall and plateau edge, toward the tremendous blue mountains beyond the river. She had taken refuge in a battlement and was waving her long, flower-twined pole in slow circles.

In an incredibly short time a whirl of wings sounded in the deep, blue twilight and a night-flying shape swept out of the dimness toward the pole. Quanna braced herself against the battlement and continued to fish the air streams blowing toward the cliffs. More swings—more swooping, dim shapes out of the twilight as the cruising nocturnal creatures of the mountains began to catch that intoxicating odour on the wind. Presently she was the centre of a whirling, dipping swarm of silent things, all making

circles around the decayed flowers like moths around a light, all in the uttermost silence except for the beat of wings.

When she saw what she wanted, she lowered the pole until the flowery tip was within reach, and she put out an intrepid hand into the midst of the hovering creatures and seized a dark, winged horror by the neck. It beat at her furiously with scaled pinions a yard long, and its thick, muscular, serpent body lashed at her face. Composedly—she had handled the winged snakes since childhood—she put down the pole and went deftly to work over the threshing thing whose great blue-scaled wings winnowed the air. The blue, reptilian body wound and rewound about her forearms and venomous hissing punctuated the wing beats. Quanna paid no attention. Deadly poison though the winged snakes are, they can be safely handled by those who know how. This one bore a small, pale brand on its flat head as token that it had been handled before.

When Quanna tossed it into the air a moment later it shook outraged wings, dived at her once or twice with fierce hissings, and then hurled itself once more into the group still circling about the rotted blossoms on the pole.

Quanna went forward confidently, hesitated a moment, then reached out to seize another of the circling things out of the flutter and confusion around the flowers. This one she stroked with long, rhythmic motions until its scaled and writhing body quieted in hypnotised inertia and the great wings folded into stillness. She wrapped a scarf around them and then went forward to beat off the rest of the swarm and cover the flowers with her cloak.

In a few minutes, when the sick-sweet fragrance had dissipated upon the air, the noxious flying coven of poison things began to disband, great, dark shapes sailing and swooping out in widening circles until the blueness of the twilight swallowed them. Quanna smoothed her disheveled hair and began to dismantle her fishing rod.

She knew that when light began to broaden again over the mountains the

branded flying snake she had released would return to its home in the cliff above the hidden fortress where she had been born. It would not be long before Vastari had the message she had bound beneath its blue-scaled wing.

And then—if Vastari trusted her enough—a certain species of hell would be unleashed upon the citadel which Jamie Douglas still held for Imperial Earth.

When the alarm sirens exploded into sudden, brazen wailing over Darva one twilight two days later, Quanna knew that Vastari still trusted her. She stood by Jamie's mirror, watching him buckle on the cuirass without which no one dared walk the battlements when Venusian spearmen were below, and her dark gaze was sombre.

Jamie, ducking into the breast-armor, was as excited as she could remember seeing him. A Venusian attack was always exciting; the rippling drums and the shrill high keening of the seven-toned pipes get into the listeners' blood and quicken the heartbeats in time with that wild, tuneless rhythm. Venusians do not shout in battle. The pipes and drums are the only sounds of attack, clear, inhuman music as if not men but something wild and rhythmic were attacking the city.

"Damned fools," declared Jamie, struggling with the straps of his cuirass. "Here help me, Quanna. Attacking with spears and slings—must be something behind this. Recognise any of 'em, Quanna? Is Vastari there? Lord, I'd like to see him over a Knute before I go!"

Her eyes veiled. "You hate him, Jamie?"

"Hate?" He paused to look at her, smiling a little grimly. "Well, hardly that. He's a symbol, Quanna—a symbol of barbarism. If I could see him dead before I go, I'd be sure of one enemy less against Venusian civilisation. Him and his babble about freedom!" Jamie snorted. "There might be safety a little longer for the people we leave behind if Vastari should die this evening. Well—"

He shrugged and swung away. Quanna followed him smoothly, her satin skirts whispering along the floor as she walked.

They stepped out into the cool evening light, into a subdued, hushed murmur of activity. Except for the shrill, inhuman rhythm of the music outside, even battle, on Venus, was—hushed. And the music was dying now as the attackers went grimly into action.

Lieutenant Morgan was waiting by the Armory door, a file of armed Earthmen with him. The great, solid block of the Armory, and the lower walls of Darva, were the work of Earthmen's hands only and their secrets known only to Terrestrials. The Armory—heart and brain of Earth domination—was unlocked only in the presence of the commanding officer, and it was not unlocked with keys. There was no chance that Venusians might gain access to this vital ganglion of defence, or Quanna would not have resorted to this last dangerous expedient of inviting attack that the Armory be opened to her.

There was no hope even of tricking the guarded combination of the door out of the few officers who knew it, for strictly speaking, it was unknown even to them. The elaborate precautions that guarded that secret were eloquent of its importance. It had been implanted in the subconscious minds of a very few Terrestrials while under the influence of neo-curare.

Morgan had just finished making a hypodermic injection into the arm of one of his men as Quanna and Jamie came up. Neo-curare, dulling the conscious mind, releasing the subconscious—

"Ready?" asked Jamie crisply.

Morgan glanced at his watch. "Ready, sir." He slid aside a tiny panel in the door, uncovering a dial. The hands of the drugged soldier hid it; his pulled eyes did not change, but his fingers began to move as Morgan said: "Armory combination." This was the effective lock that guarded Earth weapons, the lock for which no key could be stolen.

Even if Vastari could have kidnapped one of the key men, neither he

nor any Venusian knew the ingredients of the drug or the proper dosage to administer. Yes—an effective lock. But not wholly proof against traitors, Quanna told herself as she watched the weapons being brought out with rapid efficiency.

One of the Knute vibrators was being taken out of the Armory now. It looked like a thick, closed umbrella. The crew of four—three to operate, one to aim—handled the yard-long device with the carelessness born of long practice. Quanna had watched that practice more than once, from hiding places that only Venusians knew.

The Knute vibrator was a device attuned to the delicate vibrations of the brain, a wave-thrower that could disrupt the molecules of the mind, causing a mental explosion that resulted in death. Quanna had learned the simple devices that operated it during her first weeks in Darva. More important, she had learned of the safety device, the vitally significant Gilson inert fuse. Eavesdropping in the violet twilight one evening she had heard Lieutenant Morgan excoriate a crew for testing the vibrator with the inert fuse in place.

"It's the difference between bullets and blanks," his angry voice had floated up to her out of the practice yard. "Once you put the Gilson in, you've got dynamite in your hands." There had been much more, and Quanna remembered it faithfully.

Without the inert fuse, the Knute vibrator was not deadly. It threw off a vibration that had the same effect as inaudible sound, causing reasonless confusion and terror in its victims. Dangerous wild beasts could be driven off by its use, or killed with the Gilson inert fuse in place.

Quanna followed the crew that carried a Knute to the wall. They wore the usual outfit of wall defenders, metal cuirasses, helmets, face masks with heavily glassed goggles swinging at their belts.

"There is dust on your lenses, men," she said, pointing to the nearest mask.

The soldiers grinned down at her, a little flattered by the notice she usually reserved entirely for the

commander. Quanna reached for a mask and polished the eyepieces with a corner of the rainbow scarf that veiled her hair.

"You may need to see clearly soon," she told them with a serene upward glance. "Let me have your mask, soldier. . . Thank you."

Afterward she fell back and watched the men move up to the battlemented tower top and unfold the vibrator. She was not smiling; it had been easy enough, but she did not feel like smiling this evening. The masks were well rubbed now with a secretion from certain spiderlike insects of the high mountains. Like some Terrestrial creatures, the arachnid paralyzes its victims so that its larvae can feed at leisure. It is the fumes that paralyze, and they would work swiftly after the men had donned their masks and body-heat released the poison for the mucous eye membrane to absorb.

After that, paralysis, instant and effective. But paralysis of the body, not the brain. Because of that, Quanna knew that her hours in Darva were numbered.

She paused for a moment in the door of the commander's quarters to look back over Darva, which she might never see again. The walled city was in a hum of ordered activity as guns were rushed to the walls and defenders to positions in the mural towers. And always, she saw, it was Terrestrials who did the ordering. Venusians who scurried obediently in to place. She could picture what Darva would look like in the first attack after the Earthmen left. Terror, confusion, inefficiency. She was not sure even in her own mind if she were glad for Vastari's sake or sorry for Jamie's that this should be so.

But there was no time now for loitering. She went in swiftly, moving on silent feet through the hurried confusion of indoors. There was a certain tapestry-hung angle of a hallway in which she paused while two servants hurried downstairs; then her fingers were flattening against the smooth surface behind the tapestry and a panel slid open without a sound. The Earthmen might suspect, but they could not know of the hidden passages.

which Venusian masons had built into Darva.

She went upward in darkness, even her cat-vision almost blind here. Half-way up she paused to find a long, scarf-wrapped bundle in a cubby-hole. The bundle squirmed faintly, giving off the musk scent of all night-flying things on Venus, where no definite evolutionary cleavage has ever been made between reptile and bird.

At the head of the dark stairs she found another panel, and a little slit of light widened in the wall. Blue twilight poured through, and the vague sounds of Venusian battle. She could hear the heart-quickenings beat of the tripping drums below, the keening of the seven-toned pipes where Vastari's men were making a desperate effort to scale the walls before the Earthmen's invincible weapons could be turned upon them.

Quanna looked out on the turret where the Knute vibrator was being set up. From here it could rake the base of the walls with crossfire. The crew had not yet donned their masks, she saw. They were unfolding the umbrella-like weapon, till on a high tripod of meshed wires stood a conical torpedo of glass, mounted on a universal joint. From equidistant joints at the base of the tripod wires led out to control boxes, each with a red push-button.

"The Gilson," said one of the men, and was handed the inert fuse, a short, pencil-like rod. Quanna watched him slip it into place. "Power."

A red button was pushed. The mesh base of the Knute began to quiver—but only one section of it. Slowly the wavelike motion spread out, till the whole section was shimmering like a veil.

"Now!"

The next man pushed his button. The shimmer crawled on to his section. Then the third—

Quanna noticed that whenever one of the panels slowed in its rippling dance, the guardian of that section pressed his button again, replenishing the power. The three men bent over their tasks. The fourth handled the aiming of the projector.

It was not difficult. Quanna could

not see its effect from her position, but she read the faces of the men, and heard the shouts of Venusians from below the tower. A spear clattered against the battlement.

"Masks," one of the men said, and slipped his into place. The others obeyed. Quanna hugged the vaguely squirming bundle under her arm and waited tensely.

She did not have long to wait. At the end of it she stepped out on to the tower top, walking delicately among the inert but conscious men, lying awkwardly in the attitudes in which they had fallen, unable to stir or speak. They watched her with wide, glassy eyes.

She waited for the vibrations of the Knute to subside. The arms folded up into place easily enough and the device was not heavy to lift. As serenely as if the shocked and horrified men were not watching, she unwrapped her scarf from the great, scaled wings and serpent body of the flying creature she had captured several twilights ago. A harness was already buckled around it; she fastened the Knute into place as quickly as she could, for by now the silencing of this tower's defence must already have been noticed.

She tossed the freed serpent thing into the air. It hissed furiously and beat its broad, iridescent wings against the weight of the thing lashed to it. It would not fly far with that drag upon it, but there was no need of gaining distance now. Heedless of arrows, she leaned over the parapet to watch what happened.

Shouts rang out from below and from the wall defenders. Both sides had seen it now. Quanna held her breath. The flying snake was stronger than she had thought. It was carrying its burden out over the heads of the attackers, sinking slowly, but forging grimly ahead. Now it was clear of the last tower—and it was fluttering, confused falling. Another Knute had been focused upon it, she realised.

It dropped. A rush of Venusians, heedless of danger from above, closed over the threshing, scaly wings, hiding them from view. The pipes suddenly shrilled high and triumphantly.

Quanna let her breath out in a long sigh.

Then Jamie's voice, clear and resonant, shouted: "They've got a Knute! Open the gates—"

She flattened herself to the wall, straining to see the little troop of Earthmen charging outward in a wedge toward the precious weapon. Quanna heard footsteps hurrying up the stairway, but she did not move. Would Vastari obey? With this chance of killing Jamie—would he remember the surer plan and escape with the deadly vibrator?

No—not deadly. But Vastari would not know that. He would not guess the purpose of the Gilson inert fuse, or that Quanna had removed the little tube and hidden it. But as for Jamie—fighting forward toward the Knute—

A swarm of Venusians closed in between the Terrestrial wedge and the vibrator. She could not see clearly what was happening, and the footsteps were very close behind her now. She gave one last, despairing glance over the parapet and whirled toward her panel. The paralysed Earthmen watched her go.

She was leaving few secrets behind her, she reflected as she hurried down the dark steps inside. When the gun crew recovered— But this had been the only way. And she must remain hidden now in some other of the secret places in the walls until she could escape after the gates were opened. It was a risky thing to trust Vastari with the weapon, but not even in peacetime could she have walked out of Darva carrying a Knute; nor, of course, could she have captured the weapon except in the confusion and emergency of attack.

And this was only the beginning of the elaborate and cruel plan she had laid against Jamie. She should be thinking of that now, but she was not. She was seeing the battlefield as she had last glimpsed it, Jamie's bare, dark head forging forward among the attackers, and the pipes shrilling triumph. Briefly she remembered Jamie's ominous dream.

The rumble of a faraway landslide made slow thunder through the streets

of Darva as Jamie stood in the door of his quarters, drawing on his gloves and watching the last Terrestrials upon Venus form into marching order down the street. He did not look up at the high blue mountains or out over the familiar roofs and terraces below. He would remember Darva, he knew, with an aching sort of memory that would last as long as he did. But he was not letting himself think at all. He was glad of Ghej beside him, to keep his mind turned outward.

"Sure you won't join us?" he asked for the last time, and again received the beaky smile and the headshake with which the old Martian had answered that question before.

"No, I'll stay. The Solar System isn't too good a place to live in these days, but I think Venus will be the least turbulent in our lifetime. It's the last refuge from the barbarians, anyhow. I don't expect them on Venus yet awhile, perhaps not during my life span—but they'll come, commander. They'll come." He pressed his lips together and squinted under his triangular, horny lids as if into a future he did not like at all. After a moment he shrugged. "No, I'll stay. I'm adjusted here well enough." He touched the small gun that showed at his belt when the grey robe swung back. "They respect me here."

Jamie smiled. He knew the old Martian was unexpectedly swift and accurate with that small weapon.

"You'll get along," he acknowledged, and then hesitated over a question he had to ask and dreaded. "Do you . . . have you— About Quanna, I mean—"

Ghej nodded. "Once I've seen her. In Vastari's camp. She's very unhappy, commander. Venusians seldom show emotion, but I know. I think you haven't seen the last of Quanna."

Jamie's black brows met. "Lord, I hope I have! Though even now, I can't quite believe she'd—" He let the sentence die. "I wish I could get my hands on Vastari before I leave!"

"Other leaders would rise in his

place," Ghej shrugged. "What Venus really needs is—oh, some common trouble to draw them all together. Here at the end, it just occurs to me that if the Terrestrials had really oppressed Venusians, it might have been the salvation of the race." He smiled dryly. "Too late now."

A horn sounded in the street below them. It was time to go.

The calm-faced Home Guard watched them marching away. There was a wild, curiously sad tempo to the music of the seven-toned pipes which played them out of Darva. Jamie saw the first shadow of decay even before they reached the gate. For the Home Guard, to-day, was not the fine line of soldiers he had reviewed last week. Nothing blatant, of course—just a tunic loosened at the throat, a helmet askew here, an unpolished buckle there, boots with dust on the toes—He looked away.

Another distant rockslide shook its low thunder through the air as they reached the gate. Jamie thought fancifully that the familiar, slow rumble was like the sound of the crumbling Solar Empire which was letting go its last world colony to-day. Behind them the wild, sad skirl of piping died away. Before them the road wound up through foothills toward the pass. And so the last legion rode out of Darva, not looking back.

Jamie thought they would all hear that skirling music until they died, and the long, low rumble of sliding rocks above peaceful Darva, and see the high blue mountains whenever they closed their eyes. These last Terrestrials had been a long time on Venus now.

There was decadence even in the marching of the Earthmen out of Darva, for a spaceport had once kept the city in touch with the outside worlds. It closed a year ago, when they moved the Seventeenth over nearer Darkside and the cost of the port became prohibitive. And so the last Terrestrial Patrol left Venus afoot, its officers mounted on padding horses, by a slow trade trail through the mountains over which Earth's ships had once glided on sleek wings.

Civilisation had overreached itself in so many ways, thought Jamie. When the planes began to fail for lack of material from home, they had realised one serious gap, too late to bridge now. They had never needed surface transportation when the air was theirs, and now that the ships had failed—well, they tramped the roads as if their race had never mastered the drive of wheels.

Jamie was thinking inevitably of Quanna as they mounted the steep trail. He knew that one stolen Knute would not be enough to satisfy Vastari; there would be ambush somewhere along the way to the spaceport. He had come to personify in Vastari now all the qualities about Venus that irritated him most, and Quanna's shocking defection—he could scarcely believe even now that she had done what she had done—he, somehow, blamed Vastari, too, with the unreason of the subconscious. There was much he could not understand even yet; he was not sure he hoped more to see her or not to see her again before they left Venus.

The sheer, turquoise heights of the mountains were leaning above them now. They could look down, as they marched, over cloud-veiled distances at Darva showing and vanishing and showing again through gaps, each time further away, smaller, more like a memory that recedes as time goes on.

Bright reptiles squirmed from their path, scaled flying things swept more noiselessly than owls from their high nests as the Earthmen passed. The sound of falling water was all around them, and the low, shaking thunder of distant landslides.

It was a long journey over the mountain route toward the port. Somewhere along the way, Vastari must certainly strike in a last, desperate effort to take their weapons for himself. But, in spite of the difficulty and danger of the journey, Jamie thought none of them was wholly sorry that it was long. They were, for the last few days of their lives, alone in a high, blue world of turquoise rock beneath the slow surge

of the cloud-tide, and all of them knew they were spending their last days on a world they loved and would not see again.

For none of them had any illusion about the world they were returning to. The barbarians of the outer worlds were, thought Jamie ruefully, the last plague that Earthmen would have to suffer, a latter-day Black Death which neither Earth civilisation nor Earthmen would survive.

Suspense tightened as they drew nearer and nearer the end of their journey, and still Vastari had not struck. Jamie had fantastic dreams in which he thought Quanna had killed her brother to save the Earthmen, but his rational mind knew better. That she had had more than one motive in stealing the Knute he was sure, but he did not expect to feel pleasure when he learned what it was.

Darva was far behind. Each day that passed drove it further and further into memory. They all gave themselves up to the timeless present, knowing that each succeeding moment of peace might be the last. And still Vastari delayed.

There is a valley in the peaks a few hours this side of Port City. Countless tortuous ravines run up from its floor through the steep cliffs around. Earthmen did a little mining there in the old days, but nothing remains to-day except the great scars upon the cliff faces and the long, dark blasts the rocketships left—marks upon Venus that will far outlast the race that made them.

It was so obvious a place for ambush that Jamie had been fairly sure Vastari would not use it. That was probably one of the devious reasons behind the fact that he did.

Jamie, riding at the head of the column, eyed the labyrinth of ravines around him with wary eyes as they entered the valley. The ravines looked curiously confusing. There was a shimmer over the whole valley that reminded him suddenly of Mars. If he had not known himself on Venus, he would have thought that heat waves were dancing between the honey-combed walls of the valley.

Then the shimmer began to spread,

and a violet blindness closed softly across Jamie's eyes; the sound of falling water from the peaks faded into a ringing silence, and the valley was full of terror and confusion. Little mindless horrors chased one another like ripples across his consciousness.

This was it. Even knowing that, it was incredibly hard to shout across his shoulder: "Knute helmets!" and fumble at his saddle for the limp pack of his own. The horse was beginning to shiver under him, though the Knute vibrations were still too high to do more than touch its animal brain. But for Jamie there was terror in everything, even in the feel of the helmet he was shaking out of its pack. He had to grind his teeth together to get courage to pull it down over his head—he had the dreadful certainty that it would smother him when he did.

The soft, metallic cloth went on smoothly, its woven coils hugging his skull. There was a moment more of blindness and the unpleasant ringing silence that might be hiding all sorts of terrible sounds. Then something like a warmth in the very brain began to ooze inward from the helmet, and the world came back into focus.

His first conscious thought after that, as he tried to quiet his uneasy horse, was that the Knute had not been turned to killing power—yet. The helmets were protection against the lesser power of the vibrator, but they would not hold out long when the Gilson fuse turned the Knute into a death weapon. Before that happened they would have to find and silence it.

He swung his excited horse around, shouting commands in a voice that echoed thinly in his own ears through the helmet, knowing that though it would be matter of moments to locate the source of the vibrations, storming it up these twisting ravines in the face of what might at any moment become deadly waves would be quite another matter.

Everything still shimmered a little—the hills, the waterfalls, the face of Morgan hurrying up to give him the location of the Knute.

"That ravine, sir," he said, squinting over his lifted arm. "Between the waterfalls, see?" His voice was thin and quivering through the helmet. There was a strangely dreamlike air to the whole scene, as there always was under the fire of a Knute. Everything seemed so unreal that it was hard to bring his mind seriously to bear upon the problem of attack.

It was probably in a dream that Jamie thought he saw Quanna come down the slanting valley, picking her way with delicate steps and holding her familiar green velvet cloak up to clear her scarlet shoes. She was carrying a white scarf like a flag.

Unexpectedly the rainbow shimmering of the Knute began to fade. The illusion of unreality trembled a moment longer over the valley and was gone, and Jamie blinked to see the illusion of Quanna still there, looking up at him diffidently under her emerald hood and holding the white scarf up like a banner.

He kicked his horse into a trot and went forward a little way to meet her, not at all sure what he would say when he did. He could feel Morgan's eyes on his back and was angrier at her just now for making him a fool before Morgan than for anything she had done before.

He reined in silently and sat looking down at her without a word. His black-browed scowl was forbidding. Quanna put all the delicate submissiveness she could summon into her voice. She was twisting the improvised white flag between her hands with a nervousness that might or might not be assumed.

"Lord, will you hear a message from Vastari?"

Her voice was very sweet. There had been a time when Jamie might have softened to hear it; lethargy was all that possessed him now. He said nothing, only nodded shortly.

"I have persuaded Vastari," she said, "that because I saved your life once and still hold an unfulfilled promise from you, and because you have had a warning already from the Knute, you will put down all your weapons if Vastari lets you go free to the spaceport."

Jamie laughed harshly. "How far do you think I trust Vastari—or you?"

"He could kill you," she reminded him in her sweet, reflective voice. "You and most of your men. The Knute is too well hidden to find soon, and too well barriaded to take in time, even if you found it. I know how weak the helmets are against the killing strength of the Knute. No, you must bargain, Jamie dear. But not with Vastari." She came forward with a lovely, swaying motion to lay both narrow pale hands upon his knee, tilting up her face.

"I can't let you go without me, Jamie dear." Her voice quivered as musically as a harp string. "This is the only way I know to make you listen. Jamie, if you take me back to Earth with you, I can save you from Vastari. No, listen!" Her fingers clasped his knee as she saw anger darken the face above her. "Listen, Jamie! If you won't listen for your own sake, remember your men. Earth needs them, Jamie—you've told me about that! Let me go back to Vastari and say you'll give your weapons up—at the spaceport! I can make him believe that. Let me ride with you. When we reach Port City—"

"What's to prevent him killing us then?" demanded Jamie, his voice harsh. "He won't let us out of range, for all your lies."

"Oh, Jamie, believe me! Would I risk your life now, when I've saved it? I can control Vastari—I can! But I can't tell you how. Jamie, I'll ride with you . . . would I do that if there was any danger? Jamie . . . I . . . I—"

Her face and her voice both quivered suddenly. He saw her lift her hands to her eyes and a look of terror and confusion went over her features. The whole valley began to swim again in a rainbow shimmer, and sound and sight distorted faintly even with the helmet's protection. Vastari had turned the Knute on—on Quanna and the Earthmen.

Bewilderment made Jamie's mind blank for a moment. Why would even Vastari risk so safe a bargain as he thought his sister was making.

sacrifice her wantonly with the Earthmen for no reason at all? For no reason—

Then he saw his own men moving to the left against the swaying back-drop of the waterfalls that flanked Vastari's ravine, heard the shouts of their officers, and knew that someone had blundered inexcusably. Morgan? Morgan who distrusted Quanna and the commander's weakness, and had taken fatal advantage of the delay to attempt storming the Knute up the ravine?

Jamie had no way of knowing, and in spite of himself he was suddenly and savagely glad that Morgan had done it—if he had. The weight was off Jamie now—he had no impossible decision to make—whether to trust Quanna, whether to risk his men, whether to surrender to her pleading as he wanted to do and dared not.

He spurred his restive horse and swung violently around to the ravine, shouting to her over his shoulder: "I'll make my own bargain with Vastari!"

Quanna reeled back in a shower of sand from the padded hoofs, screaming above the shouts of the charging soldiers: "Jamie . . . Jamie, wait! He can't hurt you, Jamie! The Gilson—I have it! Jamie, Jamie, you'll be killed!"

But if he heard any of that illogical cry he did not believe or heed it. The soft thudding of hoof-beats in sand, and Jamie's shouts mingled with the voices of his men, were all that came back to her. She stood staring as the last Terrestrial Patrol on Venus made its last sortie into the mountains in pursuit of outlaw natives.

The range of the Knute followed them. Her own terror and confusion faded as the vibrations died around her, but they did not fade entirely. She watched until the last man vanished up the ravine between the waterfalls. Then, for lack of anything else to do, she began to hush the sand from her cloak with long, unconscious motions.

If Venusians were given to tears, Quanna would have wept then. It had all gone so well up to this vital

point. The plan itself had been simple enough—to give Vastari the emasculated Knute and let him ambush the Terrestrials, thinking he could kill them with the vibrations when he chose. Vastari had not wanted to bargain with the Earthmen, but she had convinced him of that necessity too, in the end. And she had been sure Jamie would surrender. She had seen it in his face, deep down, under the anger and distrust—because he must take his men back to Earth. He could not throw their lives away here for an ideal, and he had known he must surrender in the end, even if it meant lies and a broken bargain at the spaceport.

Neither he nor Vastari, of course, had guessed that the Knute was harmless to kill. She had not trusted Vastari that far, and she had been right indeed. Anger shook her briefly out of her lethargy. Vastari had been ready to sacrifice her, then—if he must—her usefulness was ended now. He had no way of knowing that under her robe she was clutching the Gilson fuse which made his weapon only an dangerous toy.

She smiled a thin, malicious smile even in the midst of her anxiety over Jamie. Vastari must be an astonished man just now. His deadly weapon powerless, enemies charging up the ravine, his men scattering before the gunfire of the Terrestrials—Vastari would be retreating already. With the Knute or without it. The Venusians would not stand long against Earthmen suddenly and uncannily impervious to the supposedly deadly vibrations of the Knute.

But it might be long enough to ruin all that Quanna had planned for. It might be long enough for an arrow or a spear to find a chink of Jamie's cuirass. Vastari's men were such excellent spearmen—

And she could do nothing now but wait.

Faintly, far up among the twisting ravines, the noises of battle reached a climax and wore themselves out. Quanna sat down on a flat stone close beside one of the waterfalls, hearing the thin threndody of its music above

the diminishing sounds from overhead.

"She did not hear the nearer padding of a horse's hoofs coming up the valley until it was nearly upon her, and a harsh, hissing voice said:

"Quanna!" There was a subtle excitement in the voice that was not wholly explicable.

She looked up, startled almost—but not quite—out of her self-possession. Then she cried: "Ghej! What . . . why—"

He smiled. "So Vastari did attack here," he nodded, glancing about the trampled valley floor where the Terrestrials had thrown off their packs for fighting in the mountains. "I was almost sure he would. The old cave's so near, for one thing. What happened?"

She told him, keeping her voice level. He sat listening, his hands folded on the saddlebow and his opaque, old eyes piercing under the horny lids. When she had finished he nodded gravely.

"Yes—I knew it would be something like that the day you stole the Knute. There had to be something other than simple theft in what you did. So it was all a bluff? Well—" He slanted an upward glance toward the labyrinth of ravines above them, and then swung off his horse a little stiffly. "I'll wait with you until—something happens."

"But why did you come?" Quanna returned belatedly to her first questions.

Ghej shook his crested head.

"Something's happened—I can't tell you yet."

She looked at him curiously from under her lashes, and saw now on the leathery, old face the same repressed excitement she had heard in his voice. Excitement, and something like dread. But she knew there was no use in questioning him.

She did not move again until she heard voices and sliding footsteps up in the ravine. Then she got up and stood quite still in her green cloak against the thin, green veil of the waterfall, waiting.

By twos and threes, carrying their wounded, the Terrestrials came strag-

gling back to the valley. Jamie was not among them.

He was almost the last to return. He came very wearily, alone, one arm hanging in the improvised sling of his unbuttoned tunic and the blood still dripping from what was probably an arrow wound.

Quanna took one involuntary step toward him and then stopped. Jamie looked at her phlegmatically, saying nothing. She saw in his face that he had ceased to believe or trust anything she might do, and he was clinging to the protection his lethargy offered him.

Then he saw Ghej, and his face came alive again.

"Ghej? What's happened? Did you change your mind? I—"

"Tell me first how the battle went," Ghej suggested. "And let Quanna dress your arm. Were the arrows poisoned, Quanna?"

"Some were," said Quanna. "May I help you, Jamie? Please."

He shrugged and sat down on the flat stone. "All right. Dressings in any of the packs. There's one lying over there."

She went humbly to get it. When she returned Jamie was talking in a tired monotone to the Martian. He submitted to her swabbing and bandaging without notice except for a caught breath now and then.

"They got away, or course," he was saying. "With the Knute. Had it harricaded up the ravine, but not well enough. Depending on the vibrations, I suppose, but the damned fools didn't know about the inert fuse and couldn't step it up beyond the first strength."

"I know," Ghej nodded. "Quanna has just told me—she had the Gilson fuse herself, commander."

Quanna looked up over the bandage she was fastening and met Jamie's startled eyes, an uncertain little smile on her lips.

"I tried to tell you," she reminded him gently. "You see, I really didn't mean to have you killed."

His black scowl at her was mostly bewilderment now. "But you said . . . I thought . . . I'm sorry, Quanna. But I still don't understand why—"

"Don't try now." She laid a cool hand on his cheek. "No fever yet? Then I think there was no poison. You'll be able to ride on to Port City. Jamie dear. What about me?"

He frowned a little and took the hand in his. "Not yet, Quanna. Before I go I've got one score to settle. I'm going to find Vastari and get back that Knute if it's the last thing I ever do."

Surprisingly, part of the unconscious tension that showed on Ghej's face suddenly relaxed. "Of course!" he explained. "Find Vastari! Commander I think I can lead you to him."

Quanna and Jamie stared at the old Martian incredulously. He had been in the confidence of both enemy camps for so long, and each side had come to trust so thoroughly in his impartial neutrality—After a moment Jamie said:

"Did I understand you, Ghej?"

"I want to lead you to Vastari," reiterated the Martian impatiently. "I think I know where he's gone. Venusians always scatter after a rout and meet again later at the leader's hiding place. Vastari will have gone to an old cave near here where he used to play as a boy. He's used it before for a rallying point. But he should be alone there now for an hour or more. I know the place well—it's quite near here. I'll—"

"But, Ghej," interrupted Jamie. "I'm going to kill him. Don't you understand? I know Vastari's your friend."

"I'll lead you to him," Ghej persisted stubbornly.

"Forgive me," hesitated Jamie, "but I've had too much treachery lately—or thought I had." He flashed a glance at Quanna. "You've never interfered with either side in this business, Ghej. I don't—"

"There'll be no treachery," Ghej promised him. "I swear that, commander. I'll lead you, alone, to Vastari. I promise he'll be alone, too. I promise that no Venusians will interfere on his behalf. I promise all that by the symbol of old Mars"—and he sketched the ancient crook-sign in the air.

Jamie pinched his lip and stared

at the old man under black brows. There was something elaborately wrong here. He had been aware of the subtle excitement in Ghej's manner ever since he had met, and he knew the Martian was concealing something important. If Ghej was suddenly forsaking Vastari, there was every reason to expect that he might betray Jamie, too—

And yet to meet Vastari face to face before he left Venus was worth a risk. And he had never known a Martian to lie by the sacred crook-symbol of the old world. Sudden recklessness made him shrug and say: "I'll risk it, Ghej. Only I'll warn my men first. They'll be after me if I'm not back soon. You must tell me where the cave is, Ghej, so they can follow if I don't come back."

Ghej nodded. "I can trust you in that."

Quanna's eyes had been following the conversation from face to face. All this talk of promises and trust seemed foolhardy, particularly with the stakes involved. She was utterly bewildered by Ghej's sudden about-face after a life of neutrality, but she could see clearly enough that there was some strong motive behind it.

All this was unimportant. The heartbreaking thing was that she had failed. She had played her last trick upon Jamie and lost the game. There was no longer any lever she could use to force her way upon the ship that would take him back to Earth unless—unless—

And then a sudden, blazing idea burst upon her, and she saw how easily she might have avoided all the strategies of the past and gained her one desire by a means so simple it had never occurred to her. For once Vastari knew she had deliberately betrayed him to Jamie, her life would not be safe upon Venus and Jamie would be bound in duty to take her away with him. The simplicity of it was beautiful. Only—there must be witnesses to her treachery, so that the story would spread among Vastari's men. Or else Vastari himself must not die—

"Let me go with you," she asked the two men softly, her mind already

spinning with devious plans. They gave her a look of doubtful scrutiny. "I won't interfere," she promised. "I've no love for Vastari, after what he tried to do to me in the valley. Please let me go." Her voice took on the note of irresistible pleading sweetness that Jamie remembered well, and he grinned suddenly. But before he could speak:

"Very well," said Ghej, after a moment of hesitation. "It might be well to have you there." She knew by that he was fitting her into whatever scheme was in his own mind. She lowered her lids demurely and thanked them both.

Vastari's hiding place was a narrow cavern high up in the scarred valley wall, its mouth veiled by green vines thickly abloom with purple trumpet flowers. Ghej left his two companions behind an outcropping and went in alone. The two waited in silence for his return, each too deeply immersed in speculation to speak yet about what still had to be said between them.

Jamie was too much exulted by the prospect of meeting Vastari at last to think as much as he should of Ghej's inexplicable conduct, or of his own weariness or the pain of his wounded arm. He had never performed an execution before, but he felt no scruple now about shooting down an unsuspecting man in cold blood. It would not be a man he killed in the cavern—it would be Venusian anarchy itself. It would mean a little longer peace for the people of Darva and Port City and the other Terrestrial settlements of these mountains. Since he could not leave the cities those weapons which Earth must have, he could at least remove the organized menace which made the weapons necessary.

He was having a daydream. He was thinking that perhaps with Vastari dead, no new leader would rise soon—perhaps the Terrestrialised cities inside their fortifications would be proof against scattered raids; perhaps in the face of necessity those skilled workmen who had laboured under Terres-

trial orders might labour of their own volition to reproduce the weapons Earth used to furnish them. Perhaps—

"Commander!" It was Ghej's whisper from beyond their shelter. "He's alone. He has the Knute with him. Follow me, commander."

Belated caution made Jamie hesitate for one last moment. There was still that look of intense, suppressed excitement about the old Martian, and the undernote of sadness in his voice that Jamie had never heard before. He had a sudden memory of that dream of his, and the curious notion which had followed it that Ghej was gray-cloaked Death reaching out its hand for him.

"Hurry!" Ghej was at the cave mouth, beckoning. Jamie shrugged off all his wisdom and shouldered after him through the fragrant, purple-flowered curtain into the cool dimness beyond. Ghej was just ahead of him, Quanna just behind.

The cavern was heavy with the fragrance of trumpet flowers and tremulous with green light filtering through the leaves. A man in a scarlet cloak sat dejectedly upon a ledge opposite them, cradling the folded umbrella of the Knute across his knees.

Vastari looked up, startled, as the three figures blocked light from the cave mouth. He could not quite make out who the other two were against the brightness, and he blinked for a moment, trusting Ghej from long experience and not greatly alarmed.

Jamie slid sidewise to put himself out of silhouette against the light, and his gun hand rose so that green light glittered on the barrel.

"In the name of the Imperial Planet," he said clearly, his voice hollow and echoing between the walls, "I condemn you to death, Vastari."

Ghej, flattened to the wall halfway between them, laughed suddenly and said: "No!" in the hissing Martian syllable of negation. His hand came out from under his cloak with sorcerous speed, and the gun in it was not for Vastari, but for Jamie.

The commander stared down incredulously.

"Drop your gun, commander!" said

Ghej, jerking his own weapon ominously.

Jamie let his fingers loosen. He was too bewildered for a moment even to speak as his gun thudded to the sand. He had been half expecting something like this, but it didn't make sense. Vastari's quick Venusian brain, trained in trickery leaped to swifter understanding.

"Oh, no you don't!" he cried, and was in midair before the words were finished. His red cloak and fair hair streamed as he sprang straight at Ghej. A bright grin of triumph lighted his face as his ringed hand clawed at the Martian's gun.

Ghej stepped sidewise half a pace and his other hand flashed out from beneath his cloak, moving almost too quickly for the eye to see that a small Venusian blackjack swung in his fist. It struck Vastari an accurately glancing blow.

The scarlet figure plunged past Ghej and sprawled upon the sandy floor. Across it Ghej's gun rose to fix Jamie with a black-muzzled stare.

With one lifted hand Jamie sketched the old crook-symbol of Mars in the air. He said bitterly: "Remember? But I might have known—"

"I meant it," Ghej declared, his voice strained and shaking a little. "Wait."

Vastari was sitting up, spitting out sand and vivid Venusian curses.

"Get up," ordered Ghej. "Quanna, help him. Go back to the ledge you two. Commander, Vastari—I have something to say to you both."

Vastari spat a series of highly coloured oaths at him.

"I've gone to great trouble to save your life, my boy," Ghej reminded him mildly. "I shall expect something more from you than curses."

Jamie's brows rose. He was beginning to understand at least a little. Vastari's attack upon his rescuer was clear now—no Venusian willingly allows himself to be so obligated if he can avoid it, particularly by a trick as flagrant as Ghej's had been.

"You owe me a promise now, Vastari," Ghej went on. "Part of it is this—listen in peace to what I have to tell you. Commander, this con-

cerns you, too. I followed you from Darva the day after you left. I rode very fast. Certain news had arrived which you must know before you leave Venus. Vastari, you must hear, too." He hesitated a moment. Then he drew a deep breath and said quietly: "The barbarians have come."

There was a long moment of silence in the cave. This time it was Jamie whose mind moved quicker. Vastari said: "Barbarians? But what—" Jamie's monosyllable interrupted. "Where?"

"At Yvaca. You know it, the walled valley? They landed secretly a week ago and took the city. Word had just come over the mountains when I left."

"Who are they?"

"The worst of the lot, commander. Mixed breeds from half a dozen worlds. The vanguard of no one knows how many other shiploads."

"The first plague spot," said Jamie. There was silence a moment more. Then Vastari's voice, slurred a little as if he were still bewildered from the blow:

"But what is it, Grej? I—"

"I've tricked you both," Ghej told them, still holding his gun to meet any sudden impulse on the part of either man. "You've been enemies for a long while, but you have a common enemy now and you must listen to me."

"Vastari, the barbarians have come. Venus is being attacked by outworld raiders for the first time in three hundred years."

"We'll drive them out," said Vastari simply.

"These same barbarians are attacking Earth," Ghej reminded him. "If the Imperial Planet can't keep them off, what can Venus do?"

"Fight," said Vastari, his eyes on Ghej's gun.

"Not alone. These aren't Terrestrials bent on conquest, my boy. They're bloodthirsty degenerates of a hundred races with nothing but destruction and loot in their minds. And they have weapons that even Earth can't improve on, because it was Earth who gave them away, long ago. No, there's no hope for Venus at all

now, unless—" He looked appealingly at Jamie. "Commander—"

Jamie shrugged. "They need me at home, Ghej."

"They need you here. I saw all this happen to Mars, commander. I know the signs. We've never spoken of this before, although the thought has been between us whenever we met. This is the twilight for you and me and Imperial Earth. Do you honestly think civilisation can survive what's happening on Earth now? There's no germ of it in the decadent barbarians who are conquering there. Their future is far in the past. Earth gave them a brief new grip on the tools of conquest, and they're using them to destroy Earth, when when it's done they'll go on decaying. They don't understand anything but destruction."

"My world died of an ill like this, commander. Your world is dying of it. But perhaps we can save Venus. If we can't, then this is the twilight of civilised man and he will not rise again."

"Venus?" echoed Jamie scornfully. "It's twilight for Venus, too. What does Venus know about civilisation?"

Vastari stared uncomprehendingly from one to the other, waiting his chance to spring at Ghej's gun. Ghej said heatedly:

"Do you remember what I said when we parted at Darva, commander. Venus isn't ready. If you could be strong enough to draw all Venusians together against a common enemy—teach them the value of unity and civilisation. It's as if the gods were giving us one last chance. But the barbarians won't wait, commander. Venus isn't ready. If you could only stay, just for a little while—just long enough to teach them how to fight—"

"Teach us how to fight!" roared Vastaria, springing to his feet. "Why, you dried shell of an out-worlder, we were born fighting! This is some trick of the Earthmen to lure my men into the open. Why should we join with them just as we're winning our freedom? We'll—"

"Freedom!" Jamie derided him. "Freedom to loot and kill! What do you know about freedom?"

"It's the right to live as we choose!" declared Vastari fiercely. "The same right your people fought for. Not to have tyrants making our laws, policing our towns, collecting our taxes! We don't want you back, Earthman! We'll take our chances against invaders—if that isn't another trick of Ghej's."

"Trick?" Ghej echoed sadly. "My boy, will you have to lose your freedom before you really know the meaning of the word? You must earn freedom before you can control it. You'd destroy yourself if you had what you call freedom now. Wait until the barbarians come with their weapons. The barbarians are destruction itself—wait until that overtakes you, my boy, and then remember what you had under the Earthmen!"

"Lies!" shouted Vastari. "Why should we trust you or anyone in league with the tyrant Terrestrials? We can fight for ourselves!"

All this, to Quanna, was wasted breath. The Venusian mind wanders when talk turns to the abstracts, and Quanna had an urgent problem of her own to solve. Under her velvet robe she was clutching the Gilson fuse that would turn the Knute on the ledge beside her into a deadly weapon. She thought she had found the way now to coerce Jamie—that was all her mind had room for.

She was going to turn the killing force of the vibrator upon Vastari. It would take a moment or two before the violence of the vibrations shook his brain cells apart; in that time he would realise that she was a traitor and her life thereafter would be forfeit upon Venus, for Jamie's sake. He would have to take her back with him.

True, Vastari might die. She did not much care if he did. After all, he had been equally ruthless when she stood in his way in the valley among the Earthmen. If he died, then she would shout what she had done to the echoing peaks around the cave, where she knew Vastari's men were hiding. Some of them would hear. It would amount to a burning of

bridges that would leave Jamie no choice but to take her.

Imperceptibly she had been edging the folded Knute on to her knee as Vastari shouted his defiance and hatred of Earthmen and the Solar Empire. Ghej and Jamie were absorbed, too. In the green gloom of the cavern her green robe made her a shadow on the wall. If Ghej saw her slip past, he did not heed her. He was too deep in his hopeless argument with Vastari. And Jamie's back was turned.

The Knute was heavy. She slid along the wall and passed the curtains of flowering vines, breathing a little swiftly now. She was putting all hope in this last, desperate cast.

The Knute was not too difficult to set up. She had watched the Darva men do it many times. Here, beyond the cave mouth, across a stretch of sand, was a parapet behind which she could shelter long enough to do what she must without interruption. She had the glass Gilson fuse ready to slip into place. And now—now—

A long shudder swept the purple flower trumpets before the cave. Then the rainbow shimmer of the Knute settled down and all that stretch of wall and vine became unreal, a figment of dream dancing unsteadily before the eyes. She knew that confused terror was invading the minds of the three men inside. She called clearly, yet softly:

"Ghej, send out Vastari. I am going to kill him."

There was stunned silence for a moment from inside the cave. Then Ghej's voice, quavering with the mind-shawing effect of the vibration:

"Quanna . . . Quanna, have you gone mad?"

"I mean it!" she called fiercely. "Send him out or I'll kill you all. I've got the Gilson fuse, you know!" And she smiled secretly. Jamie would not die, even if the full force of the Knute were turned into the cave. For Jamie still wore his helmet, and it would resist the killing vibrations for the few moments it took the others to die. She would be sorry to kill Ghej, but—

There was silence in the unreal cavern, shimmering behind its shimmering vines. Too long a silence. They were planning something.

"Send him out!" she called. "Send him now! I'm putting in the Gilson fuse, Ghej! Commander! Do you want to die with him?"

Still silence.

Quanna found the socket for the little glass pencil of the fuse. She fumbled a bit, putting it in. It stuck the first time. Then there was a small click and she felt a subtle change in the vibration of the Knute. Deeper, heavier. The purple trumpets of the vine began to wilt, folding softly upon their stems. The leaves crumpled. Death was pouring into the cave.

"The fuse is in," called Quanna. "Are you ready to die, Vastari?"

There was a heavy step upon the cave floor. The curtain of withering vines swept aside and a man stood in the doorway looking up at her. Jamie. His black head bare of the shielding helmet. He stood in silence, feet planted wide, frowning at her sombrely under heavy brows. He was like a figure in a dream, shimmering in the full bath of the killing rays.

"Jamie, Jamie!" Quanna sobbed, and hurled the Knute backward off the parapet. Its rays swept up across the cliff in a shimmering rainbow and the machine clattered down the slope in an avalanche of pebbles, its death ray fanning the clouds.

Quanna could not remember afterward stumbling down the rock toward the cave. Her first conscious awareness was of Jamie fending her unsteadily off his wounded arm as he leaned against the cave wall with closed eyes, waiting for his brain to stop shaking with the force of the Knute.

In the cave, Ghej and Vastari sat with heads in hands, blind and sick, as the vibrations faded slowly inside their skulls. Quanna was abstractly glad that they still lived. Now her treachery was established without the need for outside evidence. But it had been a near thing—too near, for Jamie. She shivered a little, guiding him to a seat on the ledge.

After a while Vastari lifted his head unsteadily and gave Quanna a poisonous glare. She met it opaquely. His eyes shifted to Jamie and he said in a bitter voice:

"Damn you, Earthman—I owe you my life! Now what did you want badly enough to take that risk for me?"

"Nothing," Jamie said wearily, not lifting his head. "Don't bother me."

There was something so electric in the breathless silence that followed that in a moment Jamie looked up to see what was causing it. He met Vastari's look of blank amazement.

"Nothing?" echoed Vastari in an incredulous voice. "Then why—"

"Oh, sure—I came here to kill you," Jamie spoke in a tired and indifferent voice. "But things are different now. Venus is going to need her leaders."

"But—you risked your life! No one ever does that without a reason!"

Jamie looked at him in silence. He was not sure himself just why he had done it. And there was no hope of making this Venusian understand how he felt about the world to which he had given twenty years and all his hopes and interests, the world upon which mankind might have found its ultimate future—

"You could command me to join forces with you, if you wanted that." Vastari was still groping.

"You'd be no good to me at the point of a gun," Jamie shrugged. "Fighting the barbarians will be a full-time job. I wouldn't want an ally I won like that."

Vastari sat very still, considering Jamie with fathomless eyes. Perhaps Ghej's warnings had frightened him more than his pride had let him admit. Perhaps he had been waiting for a chance to surrender gracefully. Perhaps this first encounter with genuine selflessness honestly impressed him. There was no guessing what went on behind that expressionless face. But at last Vastari said slowly:

"My life belongs to you until I redeem it, Earthman. I am pledged to Ghej, too. Will it satisfy you both if I offer my men and myself as your

sworn allies until the invaders are driven away?"

Ghej's hooded head came up for the first time since the vibrations had filled the cave. He stared long and unblinkingly at the young Venusian. Jamie was staring, too. Presently Jamie's eyes shifted to Ghej, and the two exchanged a long, questioning look in which hope was slowly dawning. After a moment Ghej said in a shaken voice:

"Venus is the morning star from Earth this time of year."

Jamie smiled. It was his own figure of speech, coming spontaneously into the Martian's mind. But he only said practically:

"It would mean much hard work, Vastari. Much sacrifice."

Vastari said with dignity: "Tell me what you need."

"More than you can give, perhaps. You can't fight the barbarians with spears. Even if you drove this group out by a miracle, there'll be more. You'll need modern weapons. There are men in the Terrestrialised cities who know how to make them, but they need supplies. That'll mean law and order, Vastari. You can't get raw materials or transport them in an anarchy where every brawling tribe has the 'freedom' to do as it likes. You'll have to forget all quarrels, forget personal jealousies, forget greed and loot and fighting. It'll mean back-breaking labor, night and day. You've got to work the mines and the machines again, hard and fast. We'll help all we can. We'll see that your trained workmen are taught what little else they may need to know, before we leave. But we must leave soon, Vastari."

Vastari was watching the Earthman's face with narrowed eyes, searching for some sign of the trickery he could not yet believe wholly absent. His quicksilver mind was turning the points over as Jamie brought them up, but nowhere, apparently, could he find anything that might be two-edged. Finally he nodded, still with that puzzled look.

"Very well, it shall be done."

Yes, thought Jamie, with Ghej's help it might yet be done, after all.

The Venusians were so childlike in so many ways, irresponsible, unable to see beyond the needs of the next moment. But Vastari, with his dream of freedom, distorted though it was, proved them more capable of pursuing an ideal than Jamie would ever have believed. And if the barbarians frightened them enough, perhaps they might work together to destroy them. And the work together, the common danger—would it be enough to build a civilisation on? Jamie knew he would never hear the answer to that question.

The walled valley of Yvaca was doubly walled with flame. From the last Terrestrial spaceship left on Venus, slanting down toward it on broad, steel wings, it looked like the valley of hell. Only the high-walled Terrestrial city of Yvaca remained now; all around it the native village that filled the valley had been fired by the invaders to keep the Venusians at bay. But there was one ship left on Venus, and Yvaca was still vulnerable from the air.

In the deep night twilight flame lapped high about the city walls and lighted the low clouds over Yvaca with a sullen, sulphurous glow. Looking down from that height as the ship slid down a long aerial incline above the peaks, Jamie could not see the Venusian mountaineers ringing Yvaca. But he knew they were there. He spoke into a microphone and felt the floor slant more sharply as Yvaca seemed to rise at a tilted angle in the port before him.

In the heart of the city, ringed by blackened ruins, lay the invaders' spaceship. They had brought it down in one careless sliding crash that demolished three city blocks. A pale stab of light shot upward from the city as the barbarians sighted the swooping ship; Jamie could see small, distorted figures running for their ruin-cradled vessel, and his teeth showed in a hard grin as lightning flamed downward from the ship. There was something horrible about the barbarians even from this height; their warped, degenerate shapes were vicious parodies of men.

Blue fire fanned downward again

from the Earth ship and touched the other vessel with a gout of flame. Half of it flew into glittering flinders that made the air sparkle over Yvaca. And now, thought Jamie, there was one ship left on Venus. The first of them had come from Earth for conquest. This last, he told himself, would set Venusians free of more than Earthly domination before it left.

The pale, stabbing ray of the barbarians' weapon shot skyward again, and the Terrestrial ship slid deftly sidewise as the ray shaved it, raking the city below with fingers of blue light that were tipped with flame wherever they touched Yvaca.

From this height there was silence in the vessel. Jamie knew that below him, in the red inferno of the valley, cliff echoed to bellowing cliff with the roar of gunfire and the crash of sliding walls and the deep-throated soughing of flame. But he would never hear the sounds of Venus any more. Already the city below was afire. Those who escaped would find Venusians waiting in a grim circle around the valley. The first plague spot of the malady that was killing Earth was being wiped out her in flame.

There would be other spots perhaps very soon. It might be well for Venus if they came soon, to keep the knowledge of peril fresh in careless minds. For Venus would have to meet the next attacks unaided. Remembering the feverish activity now in progress among the mountain cities, Jamie thought Venus might meet them well. He could not be sure about that, of course. He would have to leave Venus, never knowing.

He spoke again into the microphone and the ship banked for the last time over flaming Yvaca under the glowing clouds. No more rays leaped skyward from the city. The barbarians were in full flight. His work was done.

Cool hands upon his cheeks roused Jamie from his contemplation of the inferno below as the ship swung away. He looked up and smiled wearily into Quanna's face.

"Your last look at Venus, my dear," he told her, nodding down. She gave him a puzzled, little frown under delicate brows.

"It's not too late yet, Jamie. Oh, why wouldn't you stay? It would have been so easy to let the rest go on. You and I on Venus might have ruled the world!"

He shook his head helplessly. "I'm not a free man, Quanna. Less now than ever. I've a duty to Venus as well as to Earth—I've got to help hold the barbarians off until Venus is ready for them. Earth needs every man and every gun, but not to save herself. Earth doesn't know it, and I don't suppose she ever will, but her duty now is to keep the barbarians busy for Venus' sake—" He looked up at the girl's uncomprehending face and smiled. "Never mind. Go get your harp, Quanna, and sing to me, will you? We'll sit here and watch the last of Venus— Look, we're coming into daylight already."

Far behind them the sullen glow of burning Yvaca faded as they neared the edge of the cloudbelt. Diluted sunlight was pouring down upon the tremendous turquoise mountains and the leaning cliffs astream with waterfalls, all the high, blue country they would never see again. Quanna strummed her Martian harp softly.

"I'll probably be court-martialed," Jamie mused, his eyes on the mountains falling away below. "Or—maybe not. Maybe they'll need fighting men too badly for that. I'm doing you no service, Quanna, or myself, either. For your sake I wish you could have stayed."

"Hush," said Quanna, and struck the harp string. "I'll sing you 'Otterburn' again. Forget about all that, my dear. Listen." And her thin, sweet voice took up the ballad.

"The Otterburn's a bonny burn,
It's pleasant there to be,
But there is naught on Otterburn
To feed my men and me—"

Jamie laughed suddenly, but he shook his head when she lifted questioning eyes. He had remembered his dream again, and unexpectedly it made fantastic sense that perhaps only a Celt might have read into the dream and the song that had inspired it. He hummed the stanza again:

"Oh, I have dreamed a dreamy
dream
Beyond the Isle of Skye,
For I saw a dead man win a fight
And I think that man was I."

The clouds below were thickening now between him and the great blue mountains of Venus that slanted away below. The Isle of Skye, the morning star. The hope of civilised man. He was leaving the future behind him, if mankind had any future at all. James Douglas was a dead man indeed, sailing out into the nighttime of space toward a dying world where nothing but death waited for him. But he left the Isle of Skye behind, and on it a battle won against the powers of evil. If ever a dead man won a fight, thought Jamie, I think that man was I.

The ship drove on into darkness.

THE END

If the name of any living person is used, it is coincidence.

Published by the Malian Press Pty. Limited, 29 Bligh Street, Sydney. Printed in Australia by Mentmore Colour Productions Pty. Ltd., 49-59 Mentmore Avenue, Rosebery, N.S.W.



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